Early Black Baseball in North Carolina

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Around the mid-1800s, earlier games with names like rounders, town ball, and one cat were developing into the sport known today as baseball. By 1876, the National League had been formed, and minor-league and other levels of teams soon appeared. Until the 1950s, professional football was limited to a few large northern cities, and pro basketball had not become well established. For decades, baseball proved to be the sport of choice for most people across the United States—gaining its nickname as the "national pastime."

Black Americans, however, were largely shut out of professional baseball, after a man named Fleetwood Walker played in 1887 with Toledo in the American Association (a major league at the time). Throughout the early 1900s, much of public life remained strictly segregated, or separated, based on whether a person was black, white, or American Indian. The highest levels of play open to African Americans, often called Negro or "colored" people then, came on segregated factory or mill baseball teams, town teams, or integrated semiprofessional ball clubs in the North. Years before the establishment of national baseball leagues for black competitors in the 1920s, African American men were playing baseball all over North Carolina, from Wilmington to Asheville. Black-owned ball clubs played at a high level, supported by a growing black business class.

In 1916 one local African American business leader named E. W. Pearson organized a baseball team called the Asheville Royal Giants. The Royal Giants carried a nickname then common for African American teams in the South. Teams in places including Louisville, Kentucky, and Memphis, Tennessee, used it, too. At the time, in fact, "Giants" served as a sort of code name for a black team, patterned after black baseball's very first paid team, the Cuban X Giants. If fans saw the nickname on a poster or advertisement, they knew an African American team was coming to town.

Semipro teams such as the Asheville Royal Giants, Raleigh Tigers, and Winston-Salem Pond Giants developed many players who would later compete in the national Negro Leagues. The North Carolina squads never received the same attention as the better-known Negro League teams of the urban North and Midwest. The squads featured talented players but often were less organized. They frequently did not play in structured leagues. Few records remain beyond scattered, brief game summaries and box scores in the African American press of the era.

In the early 1920s, Raleigh had a team called the Black Star Line, named for a shipping firm owned by popular activist Marcus Garvey. In addition, a club called the Raleigh Tar Heels played in 1920 and 1921. African American teams from Greensboro, Winston-Salem, and High Point also were competing around that time. Not only the larger towns had teams in the early 1900s, however. Baseball was relatively inexpensive for children of all races to grow up playing, and North Carolina had many small towns near one another. This made games somewhat easy to arrange. Many Tar Heel towns had fairly large black populations compared to northern and western states. Towns including Greenville, Rocky Mount, New Bern, Kinston, Elizabeth City, and Laurinburg fielded black semipro teams.

Most of these semipro players earned very little from baseball, making a living through other jobs. Games often were scheduled quickly or on short notice—even while a team was on the road, in large touring cars packed with players. Sometimes fans passed a hat around the stands to collect money to support teams. Owners took about 70 percent of team earnings for operating expenses that included travel, uniforms, promotion, and umpire pay. The rest was divided among 12 to 16 or 17 players, counting substitutes and pitchers. The teams played on weeknights, especially Thursday, the traditional day off for many African Americans working as domestic employees. Fans dressed in their best church clothing to attend games, which became major social events in the black community.

Most team owners were well-to-do preachers, owners of segregated funeral parlors or taxi companies, or African American men in other businesses who loved baseball. Black baseball, black hair care, insurance companies such as North Carolina Mutual, and black funeral homes served as financial pillars of their communities in the early decades of the 1900s. Pearson had developed Asheville's black Burton Street community, and he hosted a large, annual agricultural fair attended by white and black citizens. Baseball fit in with his other pursuits.

Baseball teams offered a means of extra income for players as young as 14. Many North Carolina boys left school around that age to work in fields and help support their families. Those who played well might earn the attention of bigger teams. In addition, teams such as the Negro National League's Newark Eagles and Schenectady Mohawk Giants spent spring training in North Carolina in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Their owners could scout the rosters of North Carolina semipro opponents and take the best players back north with them.

When North Carolina's early black baseball teams traveled out of state, their opponents included teams from Florence, South Carolina, and Virginia towns such as Richmond, Petersburg, Norfolk, and Newport News. On trips, players stayed in private homes or segregated rooming houses. If they played for more prosperous owners, they spent

longer tours sleeping on team buses. Typical weeks varied widely, depending on individual owners' financing, the ability to schedule games while traveling, and players' availability from their main jobs. Most of the Asheville ballplayers worked on trains or at the Biltmore Estate, the large home owned by the Vanderbilt family.

The Asheville Royal Giants played home games at Oates Park, in the triangle formed by Southside, Choctaw, and McDowell Streets. White teams from leagues including North Carolina State, Southeastern, and Appalachian competed at Oates Park, too. The Royal Giants also used Pearson's Park, named after the team's owner. In some cities, colored teams used ballparks during the times that white minor-league teams were on the road. In other places, laws prohibited African American people from using public parks and facilities at all, which is why many black baseball owners built their own small ballparks. The Royal Giants hosted teams such as the Greenville (S.C.) Black Spinners and an Atlanta team that may have been the Dixie Giants or the Atlanta Cubs.

In the 1930s, cities such as Greensboro (Red Wings), Asheville (Blues), Durham (Red Caps), and Winston-Salem (Mohawk Giants) had active black ball clubs, as did smaller towns including Erwin (Red Sox) and Louisburg (Independents). During World War II, the Raleigh Grays played against Negro units at Fort Bragg. The Raleigh Tigers came a little later and were among the last of the state's prominent black teams. The Tigers played until the early 1960s, featuring several future minor and major leaguers.

In 1951, four years after Jackie Robinson became the first African American to play in the major leagues, some white minor-league squads in North Carolina had begun signing black players. Granite Falls of the Western Carolina League, for example, hired Boney Fleming, a pitcher from Morganton; Christopher Rankin, a pitcher out of Hickory; Conover's Bill Smith, a catcher; Hickory's Russell Shuford, a catcher; and Eugene Abernathy, an outfielder from Hickory.

By that time, major-league organizations supported six or seven minor-league teams apiece. As racial barriers slowly fell in baseball, some of the more established black segregated teams continued playing throughout the 1950s, including the Asheville Blues and the Raleigh Tigers. Smaller black teams closed down, due to the onset of televised major-league games, a shrinking talent pool after integration, and diminished fan interest. Many African Americans had already left smaller southern towns by the 1920s to seek better economic and employment opportunities to the north.

The level of play and organization of southern black baseball never reached that of the larger urban cities. But for more than 40 years, North Carolina had been a haven for baseball talent.

Seeing Stars

In 1921 14-year-old Walter "Buck" Leonard began playing for his hometown Rocky Mount Elks. This team, managed by Raymond Stith, took on every colored semipro ball club within 150 miles—competing against the Winston-Salem Pond Giants, Durham Black Sox, Salisbury Red Sox, Greensboro Black Patriots, and teams from Statesville, Tarboro, High Point, Smithfield, and Raleigh. Later, the team became the Rocky Mount Black Swans. By the time he was 20, Leonard was the manager. A quiet, religious leader, he went on to a Baseball Hall of Fame career as a first baseman with the Homestead Grays of the Negro Leagues.

There were other early African American standouts with North Carolina roots. Here are a few:

Tom Alston, of Greensboro, competed for the Greensboro Goshen Red Wings in the 1940s. In 1954 he became first African American player for the St. Louis Cardinals.

Dave "Skinny Green" Barnhill, a native of Greenville, was a star pitcher for the Indianapolis Clowns in the 1940s.

Moody "Big Train" Cozart was a longtime pitching star for the Raleigh Grays in the 1940s. The 6'4", 300-pounder later played for the Newark Eagles.

Willie Foster, a baseball Hall of Famer, was a noted pitcher who moved to Raleigh to manage the Raleigh Tigers.

Burnell "Bun" Hayes, a pitcher from Louisburg, starred for the powerful Baltimore Black Sox of the 1920s.

Charlie Neal played for the Raleigh Tigers before signing with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1956.

Hubert "Bert" Simmons, of Tarboro, played for the Raleigh Tigers in the early 1940s and, later that decade, for the Greensboro Goshen Red Wings and Asheville Blues. Simmons played Negro League ball for the Baltimore Elite Giants.

Leamon Yokely's back-to-back no-hitters earned him notice as a collegian in the 1920s and led to his career with the Baltimore Black Sox. Yokely and Hayes were college rivals; Yokely pitched for Livingstone College in Salisbury and Hayes, for Johnson C. Smith in Charlotte.

**At the time of this article's publication, Bijan C. Bayne was working as an award-winning freelance writer in Washington, D.C. His published works include the book* Sky Kings: Black

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